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SUBJECT: NGO AND GVN PARTNERS TALK ABOUT TIP IN MEKONG DELTA

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: A recent visit to the Mekong Delta provinces bordering Cambodia highlighted the efforts of The An Giang/Dong Thap Alliance to Prevent Trafficking (ADAPT) against Trafficking in Persons (TIP). GVN partners reported an increasing number of victims from An Giang being trafficked directly across the northern border to China, though hard statistics remain difficult to determine. Also, while the number of women visiting foreign marriage counseling centers in An Giang has decreased in recent years, NGOs have reported "white outs" in several villages across the Delta where marriageable-age girls have all emigrated overseas. Lack of local economic opportunities and educational awareness remain primary drivers of both trafficking and foreign marriages. End Summary.

New Evidence of Trafficking to China

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¶2. (SBU) From August 6-8, EconOff traveled to An Giang and Dong Thap provinces to support the anti-trafficking in persons activities of USAID-funded ADAPT, an NGO coalition comprised of Pacific Links, the East Meets West Foundation and the International Children Assistance Network. ADAPT is leading efforts to assist girls in the Mekong Delta who have been victims of or are at high risk for cross-border trafficking. While in An Giang, EconOff also met with Ms. Tran Thi Lan, Vice Chairman of the province's Women's Union, and Mr. Nguyen Thanh Hai, Deputy Head of the specialized anti-TIP criminal investigation police, PC14, and other Vietnamese government bodies that are also doing their part to combat trafficking.

¶3. (SBU) PC14's Mr. Hai told EconOff that while typically victims are trafficked to Cambodia and then to third countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, there is an increasing trend of victims being trafficked to China. He pointed to two specific cases over the last 18 months--in February 2009, Vietnamese police arrested two individuals who allegedly trafficked four women and one child from An Giang Province to Guangxi province on Vietnam's northern border. Similarly, in April 2008, police uncovered a case in which victims from An Giang were being transported to China by train. Hai noted that victims are being taken further inland in China, making investigations and repatriations more difficult. Thus far, only one trafficking victim from these two cases has been returned to Vietnam. Mr. Hai also said while these two China TIP prosecutions are still pending, ten traffickers have been convicted in An Giang between 2004 and 2009, illustrating the increasing effectiveness of Vietnamese law enforcement in combating TIP.

14. (SBU) Despite improving cooperation among GVN agencies responsible for combating TIP, accurate official statistics are still hard to come by, and the different perspectives among partners show in comments made by GVN agencies and NGOs. According to An Giang Women's Union Vice Chair Ms. Lan, the number of girls who are being trafficked in An Giang province has declined significantly in recent years. Ms. Lan said the official number of victims in 2008 was just one person, down from a peak of 23 in 2002. She claimed the total number of trafficking victims has been 191 since 1991. ADAPT staff said that those figures only reflect cases reported to the police and don't come close to representing the true scope of the problem. Based on what they have been hearing in the field, they estimate closer to 1,000 victims over the last year alone. A senior contact at the International Organization of Migration said that the Women's Unions generally underestimate the number of women trafficked, since they rely on women coming forward and many victims remain silent for fear of social stigma and discrimination. In contrast, IOM said figures reported by the police can be over-estimated, since ward and commune officials reporting into the residential registration system in some places have a tendency to report "missing" women as trafficked, even when IOM has later confirmed through follow up interviews that the women left to marry overseas or work in factories around Ho Chi Minh City.

Delta "White Outs"

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15. (SBU) The trend of young Delta women emigrating overseas for  
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marriage or employment, primarily to Taiwan and Korea, has also contributed to the trafficking problem, as many traffickers pose as marriage or labor brokers in order to lure women overseas into prostitution or forced labor. The An Giang Women's Union runs a counseling center for women considering foreign marriages, briefing them on the culture and traditions of their intended countries as well as warning them about popular trafficking schemes and informing them of their legal rights abroad. Ms. Lan said while the numbers of girls seeking assistance had been steadily declining from 700 cases in 2003 to around 200 cases in 2008, there are now several villages, particularly around the southern city of Can Tho, where all of the marriageable age girls have left to marry foreigners, resulting in "white outs." She said that the center does not discourage these marriages, though the media has increasingly reported stories of women subjected to domestic violence and forced labor after contracting marriage abroad. Ms. Lan estimated that these stories represent only a small number of cases ("around 5 percent") and in most instances women who marry overseas are able to send back an average of \$160 USD per month to their families, and some "good" husbands even build new homes for their brides' families in Vietnam. As families see their neighbors economically benefitting from their daughters' foreign marriages, increasing numbers want to encourage theirs to do the same.

Efforts to Combat Trafficking

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16. (SBU) The An Giang Women's Union is primarily involved in public awareness campaigns in border villages, including distributing educational materials and using performing arts groups and the media to disseminate information about the dangers of trafficking. Ms. Lan said that they receive \$25-35 million VND per year from the GVN for their anti-TIP programs

and receive aid from IOM to run a Victims Assessment Center and from the Asia Foundation to operate a micro-credit program.

¶7. (SBU) ADAPT is the primary driver for programs geared at preventing at-risk girls from being trafficked and for repatriating/reintegrating victims from the border provinces. In terms of prevention, ADAPT runs a scholarship program for more than 300 students in three Mekong provinces encouraging families to keep their daughters in school, as well as several summer camps where girls learn about the risks of being trafficked and participate in exercises to build confidence and life skills. ADAPT also runs a vocational training and job placement program that has recently been expanded to the culinary industry in Ho Chi Minh City.

¶8. (SBU) EconOff and USAID reps toured the Open House for repatriated victims of trafficking run by ADAPT with the support of the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA). The bright, welcoming center currently has 20 residents and provides room and board as well as temporary residency registration procedures, medical care, psychological counseling and vocational training.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: While the GVN has ramped up efforts in recent years to combat TIP through public awareness campaigns and increased law enforcement efforts in recent years, providing assistance to TIP victims remains primarily in the hands of NGOs, several of which have expressed concern over the decreasing level of public and private funding available for anti-TIP initiatives in Vietnam. One contact lamented that while philanthropic support for anti-TIP programs was very "hip" among donors in Vietnamese communities in Southern California several years ago, many have decreased their contributions due to the economic downturn or decided to donate to other causes. At the same time, many NGOs feel USG funding has moved on to other Southeast Asian countries perceived to have more urgent or more recent TIP issues. GVN contacts note that young women in the Delta will continue to become at-risk for trafficking as long as economic hardships at home force them to look at opportunities abroad, and believe Vietnam's continued economic development is the key to resolving TIP issues long-term. End comment.

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¶10. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.  
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